

# Student-Centered Learning Spotlight

## Students Take Ownership Over Their Own Learning Spotlight on Providence Student Union

**Students take ownership over their own learning** by becoming actively engaged in their own success, incorporating their interests and skills into the learning process, and having a voice in decision-making about issues that affect their learning at the classroom, school, district, and state levels.

*Examples:*

- Opportunities for students to reflect on their own work, development, and learning styles
- Student-led parent-teacher conferences and Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings
- Student voice in school-level decision-making, including school improvement efforts
- Community-based programs that support student advocacy at the school, district, and state levels and prepare students to lead.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

### Providence Student Union: Who We Are

“We are a non-profit organization with one goal: building student power so that young people can improve their education and well-being.

We aspire to be a genuinely youth-led union where young people can freely unite to develop leadership skills, organize for ground-up improvements to their schools, and ultimately win a fair say in the education system.”

Source: Providence Student Union. (n.d.). *Our story - Providence Student Union*. Retrieved August 22, 2017, from [www.pvdstudentunion.org](http://www.pvdstudentunion.org)

### An Executive Director's Perspective: Student Ownership Needs to be Authentic

- For Zack Mezera, Executive Director and Co-Founder of Providence Student Union (PSU), “Student ownership is technically about knowledge and power. I see a lot of work around student voice and leadership that is well intentioned but falls short of student ownership because it doesn’t relinquish knowledge and power to students who are constituents and who are actually affected.”
- PSU empowers students to take ownership of their education by combining organizing, strategic thinking, political awareness, and student support.
- “We try to be authentic about student ownership and give students the power to make real decisions,” Mezera says. For example, when PSU hires new staff, students write the job descriptions, read resumes, conduct the interviews, and make final decisions. Mezera admits, “This is a huge risk for myself as director, but the students really own the decision and own the risk.”
- Students need to be prepared for leadership positions, so they practice facilitation and public speaking in small groups before expanding to larger audiences. “There are ladders of ownership just like there are ladders of engagement,” Mezera says.

### Providence Student Union's Ethnic Studies Campaign

- PSU advocated for and collaborated with the Providence Public School Department to create a full-credit Ethnic Studies course that was offered at five Providence high schools for the first time in 2016.
- Dorbor Tarley, a senior at Classical High School and member of the Ethnic Studies Task Force, believes that having Ethnic Studies classes in Providence Public Schools is essential because it “helps you have dialogue and have real conversations.” She says, “In regular history classes we are just learning through the oppressor’s mindset and we are not learning about the people who have been oppressed so it is the same narrative every year, just different people.”
- Kafui Glover, a junior at E-Cubed Academy and member of the Ethnic Studies Task Force, believes that “Ethnic Studies is important because we are such a diverse group of students. This class is so important because it reflects our demographic. It also teaches you about yourself and your own people -- even something you may have never known before.”
- “The students at E-Cubed who have taken [Ethnic Studies] think that it is amazing,” Glover reports. “You can feel their passion to learn. They are happy about what they are learning. It is something new and different and out of the ordinary. It’s more than a curriculum; it’s themselves.”

## Student Perspective: Kafui Glover, Change Maker

- Kafui Glover, 16, is a junior at E-Cubed Academy in Providence. She has been a member of PSU since she was a freshman. This year she will serve as a PSU Delegate at E-Cubed Academy and will continue to serve on the Ethnic Studies Task Force.
- Glover loves the opportunity to take ownership of her own education by serving on the Ethnic Studies Task Force and determining the course content and course readings. "It feels amazing that somebody actually wants to hear what I have to say about how I learn," Glover says.
- Being part of PSU has shown Glover that as a student she has the ability to collaborate with peers to create a successful campaign and have a "great impact." She believes that PSU encourages students to fight for what they believe in and recognize how much their voices matter. She says, "You can actually say how you feel to officials and they listen."
- Glover offers this advice for school officials who want to increase student ownership over their own learning: "If the students have something they are actually passionate about, let them have a stab at it. Don't take too much control of the project. You will be shocked by what kids can actually do and accomplish without adults taking over."
- Glover also notes that adult support is key. At PSU, she appreciates that "Adults are allies. They ask what is going on in our schools. They write notes, they get us thinking, and they keep us on our toes. They keep us trying new things and new tactics. They are always encouraging us to keep going."
- Glover says, "I'm a part of PSU because I like to consider myself a change maker. I don't like to settle for anything less than what I deserve as a human. This organization is all about change and fighting for what we deserve."

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## Acknowledgements

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> The Nellie Mae Education Foundation. (2016). *Learning is student-driven*. Retrieved November 10, 2016, from [www.nmefoundation.org](http://www.nmefoundation.org)
- <sup>2</sup> Reif, G., Shultz, G., & Ellis, S. (2016). *A qualitative study of student-centered learning practices in New England high schools*. Quincy, MA: Nellie Mae Education Foundation.
- <sup>3</sup> Toshalis, E., & Nakkula, M. J. (2012). *Motivation, engagement, and student voice*. Retrieved November 10, 2016, from [www.studentsatthecenter.org](http://www.studentsatthecenter.org)

## Student Perspective: Dorbor Tarley, Change Maker

- Dorbor Tarley, 17, is a senior at Classical High School in Providence. Like Glover, she has been a member of PSU since she was a freshman. She serves as a PSU Delegate at Classical High School and is part of the Ethnic Studies Task Force.
- In her role on the Ethnic Studies Task Force, Tarley facilitates monthly community meetings and recently spoke at an Educators of Color Conference at Providence College.
- Tarley initially got involved with PSU during the successful "Walk in Our Shoes Campaign" that aimed to expand bus pass access for Providence students. Before this campaign, only students living three miles or more from school were eligible to receive bus passes from Providence Public Schools. The campaign was a success, and in 2015 the City offered bus passes to students living more than 2 ½ miles from school, and in 2016 this distance was further reduced to two miles. Prior to her involvement, Tarley said, "I never felt like as a student I could be that powerful."
- Students are able to take ownership over their education "when someone believes in you and gives you choice and freedom to decide," Tarley says.

## Next Steps

- PSU will continue to collaborate with the Providence School Department to make sure there is a high quality and engaging Ethnic Studies curriculum with committed teachers and School Department support.
- Tarley plans to distribute a survey to students to get their feedback about the Ethnic Studies classes and provide that feedback to teachers and Providence School Department officials.
- PSU continues to work on its campaign to Fix Our Schools that calls for greater investments in school construction and repairs.



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